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ABSTRACT

A study investigated metadiscoursal signalling devices used in discussions in a business administration course in a British university, focusing on the use and function of the devices in seminars and tutorials. Data were drawn from seminar and discussion classes recorded for distance education purposes. The corpus of about 30,000 words included 18 presentations and discussions, with question-and-answer sessions, led by different faculty. It was found topic and interactional markers were widely used, and that some metadiscoursal signalling devices may have a dual function, operating for strategic, interpersonal purposes alongside the overt function of indicating textual relations. The range of devices functioning, at least at one level, to signal text is found to be a salient feature of interaction in seminar presentations and discussion, and is seen as relevant to any language description for pedagogical purposes. Implications are drawn for the oral language syllabus of English for Academic Purposes. Contains 20 references. (MSE)

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Metadiscoursal Signaling in Academic Discussions

By

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Metadiscoursal Signaling in Academic Discussions

This article reports on a study into metadiscoursal signaling devices in discussions on an MBA (Management of Business Studies) course in a British university. The study focused on the uses of such devices in seminars and tutorials. This paper reports on findings of the devices used and their functions in interaction. Metadiscoursal signaling was observed to be used for the interactional purposes of marking topic, discourse activity and the type of information to be supplied by the speaker.

INTRODUCTION

One way speakers indicate mark the importance of what they say and draw attention to the content of their utterances is by using elements relating to the organization of discourse itself, i.e. signaling. Crissmore (1990:1) uses the term *metadiscourse* in relation to elements relating to the organisation of discourse itself and to aspects of the relationship between interactants. Sinclair (1982) identifies two aspects of language, language as a continuous negotiation between participants (the interactive plane) and language used to record experience and propositions (the autonomous plane). The use of textual signalling in presentation texts in seminars has been investigated, e.g. Coulthard & Montgomery (1981) and a number of pedagogic texts present such signaling, e.g Lynch & Anderson 1992. Turns in academic discussion are often fairly extensive, and signalling devices are used more often than in shorter turns such as might occur in conversational exchanges. Textual signalling thus appears to be a prevalent feature of discussion in seminars and the ability to decode and use it is potentially important for non-native speakers.

The ways in which speakers or writers forewarn their audience of coming text have been variously termed in the literature. McCarthy (1991) discusses *discourse organising words* McCarthy (1998) argues that metalanguage is often found in opening turns in exchanges functioning to indicate decision processes and topic shifts. Weissberg (1993) talks of *advance organisers and topic shifters*, Tadros (1985, 1994) of *advanced labelling*, Crissmore (1990) of *announcements of main ideas, rationales, purposes and strategies*, Hatch (1992) of *discourse deixis* and Redeker (1990) of *paratactic sequential relations*. Burton (1981) following on from the approach established by Sinclair and Coulthard

(1975), uses the term *metastatements* for acts that indicate what the next piece of talk will be about. These terms are all used to refer to the same notion of devices with which speakers or writers foretell or postscript the coming or past discourse. From our examination of turns in discussion in seminars, discourse signalling devices were observed to signal topic, interactional activity and type of information.

DATA DESCRIPTION AND PROCEDURE

The study reported in this paper formed part of a general investigation into discourse in academic seminars on an MBA program in a British University and and the implications for the speaking syllabus of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses (Basturkmen 1995, 1998). The study entailed the collection of a corpus of texts of naturally occurring seminars and academic discussions which were then transcribed and examined for recurring linguistic patterns and features.

A corpus was collected of video recordings of seminar and discussion classes on the MBA course at Aston University, Birmingham. These recordings were of in-house lessons made for students on the MBA distance learning program. The corpus was approximately 30,000 words and comprised eighteen texts selected from classes over a range of seminar and discussion type classes given by a range of faculty. The texts were of discussion in tutorials and in the question-answer sessions following presentations given by students or guest speakers.

The following symbols are used in the transcription of texts:

S1, S2, etc.	The beginning of turns of different students
P1, P2, etc.	The beginning of turns by different presenters
T	The beginning of a turn by a tutor

\\ Overlap where a speaker takes a turn from another before completion and marks where overlap begins

[Turns that started simultaneously

+ Noticeable pause

The transcribed texts were studied in reference to metadiscourse discussed in the literature (see Introduction). The aim was to see how speakers signalled metadiscourse in the specific genre of academic discussion.

FINDINGS

1. Topic Markers

Discourse topic has been categorised into two: *continuous topic* whereby speakers collaborate or incorporate previously occurring subjects into their talk and *discontinuous* topic whereby speakers introduce or re-introduce subject matter (Keenan & Schieffelin 1975: 342-3). The interest in this sub-section is in *discontinuous topic*, i.e. topic that does not draw on immediately preceding topic in the discussion. Topic introduction or re-introduction need not, of course, be indicated by any discrete item but may be integral to an eliciting move. For example, should a speaker say, *How about the cost of this?* when there has been no immediately prior talk of cost, then clearly this is an introduction of a new and discontinuous topic. Two common, overt markers of discontinuous topic in seminar discussion were observed and are termed in this study *back-referencing* and *titling*. Both of these devices tend to be turn-initial.

Back-referencing

Back-referencing is common in post-presentation discussion as a pre-eliciting act when speakers wish to indicate a new topic. As the term implies, they loop back to previous topics, usually those involved in the presentation. Some examples are given:

1
T: *Actually you focused on the role of the company* was actually the role developed with the European market in view or was it specifically developed first for the UK
2
S1 *You say the management team often involved a number of employees* how does it complicate things

3
S1 Yes I have a question *you talked earlier about how they segmented the market you said they'd actually segmented the market in a number of ways that you said were relatively successful you said it wasn't just they hadn't just done it demographically but in a number of ways* do you feel they could have made better use of psychographic profiles of their customers

The first two examples are fairly simple and include the use of reporting verbs *you focused* and *you say*. The third example is more interesting and involves quite a lengthy back-referencing to previous text which seems at first unnecessary. The speaker could have simply said *You talked earlier about how they segmented the market*, which would have clearly indicated the topic and then the speaker could have gone straight into elicitation. However, he does not do this. How can this lengthy back-referencing be accounted for? One possibility is that speakers in these situations sometimes have a dual purpose: firstly to introduce the topic and secondly to recapitulate on the propositional content of the earlier discourse as a strategic move, functioning to make the speaker's suggestion appear well founded. This then smoothes the way for confirmation of S1's question, i.e. given the build-up of what the presenters are alleged to have originally said, it would be difficult for the presenters to then not confirm in their response that S1's proposition is valid.

Titling

Devices of an elliptic nature and which resemble written titles are also used to indicate discontinuous topic. Hatch (1992: 239) has noted that a feature of unplanned dialogue is that a new topic or topic shifting is often done through use of marked topic-comment structures such as left-dislocation of the subject to indicate its status as topic. McCarthy (1991: 51-52) notes the phenomenon of *left-displaced subjects* saying that although this

device is common in spoken language it tends not be presented in pedagogic texts. In the data, titling devices are often turn-initial in post-presentation questions but may occur elsewhere in the turn to indicate topic change or shift. The latter was observed in particularly long turns, including the presentation itself. McCarthy (op cit: 132) notes that "topics can be the reason for talk or they can arise because people are already talking." In seminar discussion, especially in post-presentation discourse, topics are often the reason for talk and titling devices function to orient the interlocutor and audience to the subject. Intonational features observed in the data included stress and a pause after the topic name. Some examples from the data are:

1
S4 Yes eh *your pan European policy then* + has it been to so to take say a video shot in ===

2
S3 One other thing you hear *quality of service* + You mentioned eh the convenience eh the convenience shops open from early morning =====
(Student presentation text 3)

2. Discourse Activity

Whereas the previous subsection showed markers signalling topic, other markers indicate discourse activity. Flowerdew (1992: 213) in a study of lectures talks of *peripheral utterances* prior to definitions that mark the forthcoming discourse with a *grounder* to prepare the listener. The idea that speakers forewarn and indicate discourse activity is contained by the concept of *prefaces* also. Stubbs (1983: 181-82) talks of the function of prefaces as "displaying an analysis of a preceding or following utterance ..... (which) give hearers clues as to both the illocutionary force and propositional content of the coming utterance." In regard to written texts, Stubbs warns that prefaces should not be taken on their face value and that they may not accurately describe what actually then happens. One function of the preface is to enter a discussion and this may take precedence over

following through with the stated action. The following excerpts illustrate this category of devices signalling discourse activity:

1
S2 *Can I ask* um how much more successful the recent sales of 200 400 and 800 has been ===

2 Turn-initial and turn-final signalling devices
S4 Yes *I was going to ask you* when you were going to write to Michael Porter at Harvard and tell him you disagreed with his New-bend where he says you are a cost reducer or a differentiater if you are neither of those two things you are stuck in the middle and what you are saying is actually that doesn't exist you have to combine the two and so *it was just a bit of a frivolous question really*

3
S2 \\ *But the point that I'm making is* that you're saying that's the strength of the organisation (P4 Has been yes) at BTR the chief executive officer is that particular charismatic individual without that person will the company continue the path its trodden so well over recent years ====

4
S1 *Can I just come back in with another question* it's really just to turn all this on its head and ask you comments on the sceptic's view of this partnership purchasing which is the big companies dumping on the small companies =====

From the examples above, it can be seen that a number of prefaces involve the verb *ask* or the nouns *question* or *point*. In example 2, there is both a marker referring forward and one referring back. The latter is among the very few examples of turn-final activity markers in the discussion texts.

How accurate are the interactional markers in foretelling the activity the speaker proposes? Example 1 forewarns of *asking* and the speaker follows through with a 'question'. In example 2, the relationship between the *asking about* of the activity marker and what follows is less clear. In excerpt 3, we see that the marker involves the phrase *make a point* and yet following on there is both a statement about the strength of the

individual, which can be seen as a point and also a question about the future of the company. In example 4, the speaker follows through with what can be described as a criticism or a disagreement. To an extent then, some turn-initial activity markers may be misleading.

The approach of some writers of pedagogical materials and language description for pedagogic purposes, e.g. Price 1978, James 1984, to present turns as having one overall and specific communicative function, such as *to disagree* or to *ask a question*, and that this function is indicated by turn-initial prefaces does not represent well the nature of these devices and oversimplifies what an interactant may do within a turn in discussion. Topic indicators (prefaces) have both a descriptive and strategic function: they may accurately describe what is to come or is past but they may simply be a means to take the floor and/or extend the turn in an attempt to render it less abrupt and more polite.

3. Information Type Indicators

A further category of textual signalling device evident are those indicating the type of information that is forthcoming or that has passed. In regard to written texts, Tadros (1985: 73) discusses the concept of *advance labelling*. This she defines as a category of prediction in which the writer both labels and commits him or herself to perform a discourse act and in which the sentence labelling the act must not include its performance. She offers the example: "This analysis leads us *to make the important distinction* between real income and money income. Money income measures a ....." Tadros discusses this category with reference to verb phrases and verbs such as *make a distinction, distinguish, examine and compare*. McCarthy (1991: 74-78) uses the term *discourse organising words* (e.g. *issue, problem*) to denote words signalling the author's intent and which function to organise and structure the argument.

In seminar discussion, such predictive devices are seen in both elicitations and responses and ability to follow them may well be crucial for NNSs. In elicitations, these devices serve to indicate the type of information that is the speaker requires from the interlocutor and in responses they clarify speaker intent.

1
S6 I was going to ask you about *the similarities and differences* that you pointed out towards the end ====

2
P ==== *the distinctive patterns* I notice are certainly the changes among women =====

The following categorisation is proposed to account for the textual signalling devices evident in discussion.

Figure 1 Classification of Signalling Devices within turns

Signal of	*Types*	*Typical exponents*	*Example*
1. topic	back-referencing	you + reporting verbs	*You say the management team often complicates things* how do you ...?
	titling	noun phrase + pause	Yes eh *your pan-European policy then* + has it .....?
2. discourse activity		requests for permission or statements of intention to ask questions or make points or comments	*I was going to ask* could we be asked to define .....?
3. information type		mention of types of information, e.g. characteristics, example, definition	first of all *a definition* of conglomerate

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

An issue brought to light by the investigation into textual signalling devices is the potentially dual function some devices may have for strategic, interpersonal purposes in addition to their overt function of indicating textual relations. For example, extensive back-referencing prior to an elicitation may function to enhance the thrust of the speaker's point. Discourse activity markers were presented as potentially functioning to lessen the abrasiveness of an otherwise short and direct question. The discussion of functions of language separately such as propositional, textual and interpersonal is an artificiality and it must be recognised that any component within talk may simultaneously function on a number of planes. Nevertheless, it is believed that the range of devices functioning, at least on one level, to signal text is a salient feature of interaction in seminar presentations and discussion and one which has relevance to any language description for pedagogic purposes.

Metadiscoursal signalling is a recurring feature of academic discussion in tutorials and discussion based classes. In particular, topic and interactional activity markers are widely used and the nature of post-presentation discussion in which speakers need to indicate the relationship between their contribution and the presentation. The paper reports on an investigation into metadiscoursal signalling as used specifically in discussion classes in a university setting. It is hoped that the range of devices brought to light offers a a description of language derived from observation of naturally occurring talk for teachers and materials designers in EAP.

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